

The Athenian Mercury:

Saturday, February 4. 1693

Quest. 1. **D**Escartes has been branded by several Ingenious Learned Men for an Atheist, and one principal reason they give, is, because he says in his Method we ought to comply with the Forms and External Customs of Religion in the Countrey we are Educated, tho I am willing to believe he means only in respect of the Christian Religion: Since there are several other passages in his Metaphysics, which seem to intimate as much, Pray what is your Opinion in the Matter?

Ans. We can't do that Great Man more Justice than to let him speak for himself, and in the English Tongue, that every one may understand him, being well assur'd, that the whole will be very acceptable to the Reader, and (as we think) a demonstration that Descartes was no Atheist: Take him as follows, with a little Abridgment at the beginning.

'Because our Senses sometimes deceive us, I would suppose that there was nothing which was such as they represented it to us. And because there are men who mistake themselves in reasoning, even in the most simple Matters of Geometry, and make therein Paralogisms, judging that I was as subject to fall as any other Man, I rejected as false all those Reasons, which I had before taken for Demonstrations. And considering, that the same thoughts which we have waking, may happen to us in sleep, when as not any one of 'em is true, I resolv'd to feign, that all those things which I ever conceiv'd, had no more truth in 'em than delusory Dreams; but soon after I observ'd, that whilst I wou'd think that this truth, I think, therefore I am, was so certain, that all the most wild Suppositions of Scepticks was not able to shake it, I thought I might receive it as certain, for the first Principle of the Philosophy I sought.

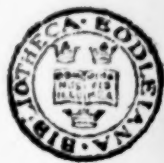
'Examining then carefully what I was, and seeing I cou'd imagine that I had no Body, and that there was no World, or Place, yet I cou'd not imagine that I was not; and that even contrary thereto, thinking to doubt the truth of other things, it necessarily follow'd that I was; whereas if I had ceas'd to think, altho all the rest of vvhatever I had imagin'd were true, I had no reason to believe that I had been. I knew then that I was a Substance vvhose vvhole Essence or Nature is to think, and one that to be, hath no need of place, nor depends on any material thing: So that this I, viz. my Soul, by which I am what I am, is vvholly distinct from Body, and more easie to be known than Body; and altho' Body were not, I shou'd not cease to be what I am.

'After this I considered in General, vvhhat is requisite for the certainty of a Proposition; for since I had found out one which I knew was such, I thought I also ought to consider wherein that certainty consisted, and having observ'd, that there's nothing at all in this, I think therefore I am, which assures me that I speak the Truth, except this that I see most clearly; that to think one must have a Being, I judg'd that I might take it for a General Rule, that those things which we perceive clearly and distinctly are true, and that the difficulty only is in observing precisely vvhhat those things are vvhich we distinctly conceive.

'In pursuance whereof, reflecting on what I doubted, and that consequently my being was not perfect; for I clearly perceived, that it was a greater perfection to know, than to doubt, I advis'd in my self to seek from whence I had learnt to think on something which was more perfect than I; and I knew evidently that it must be of some Nature which was indeed more perfect. As for what concerns the thoughts I had of divers other things without my self, as of Heaven, Earth, Light, Heat, and a thousand more, I was

'not so much troubled to know whence they came, for that I observed nothing in them which seemed to render them superior to me; I might believe, that if they were true, they were Dependencies from my Nature, as far forth as it had any perfection; and if they were not, I made no account of them; that is to say, That they were in me, because I had something deficient. But it could not be the same with the Idea of a Being more perfect than mine: For to esteem of it as of nothing, was a thing manifestly impossible: And because there is no less repugnancy that the more perfect should succeed from, and depend upon the less perfect, than for something to proceed from nothing, I could no more hold it from my self: So as it followed, that it must have been put into me by a Nature which was truly more perfect than I, and even which had in it all the perfections whereof I could have an Idea; to wit, (to explain my self in one word) God. Whereto I added, that since I knew some perfections which I had not, I was not the only Being which had an existence, (I shall, under favour, use here freely the terms of the Schools) but that of necessity there must be some other more perfect whereon I depended, and from whom I had gotten all what I had: For had I been alone, and depending upon no other thing, so that I had had of my self all that little which I participated of a perfect being, I might have had by the same reason from my self, all the remainder which I knew I wanted, and so have been my self infinite, eternal, immutable, all-knowing, almighty; and lastly, have had all those perfections which I have observed to be in God. For according to the way of Reasoning I have now followed, to know the Nature of God, as far as mine own was capable of it, I was only to consider of those things of which I found an Idea in me, whether the possessing of them were a perfection or no; and I was sure, that any of those which had any Imperfections were not in him, but that all others were. I saw that Doubtfulness, Inconstancy, Sorrovv, and the like, could not be in him, seeing I cou'd my self have wish'd to have been exempted from them. Besides this, I had the Ideas of divers sensible and corporeal things; for although I supposed that I doted, and that all that I savv or imagin'd was false; yet could I not deny but that these Ideas were truly in my thoughts. But because I had most evidently known in my self, That the understanding Nature is distinct from the Corporeal, considering that all Composition witnesseth a dependency, and that dependency is manifestly a defect, I thence judg'd that it could not be a perfection in God to be composed of those two Natures; and that by consequence he was not so composed. But that if there were any Bodies in the World, or else any Intelligences, or other Natures vvhich were not vvholly perfect, their being must depend from his Power in such a manner, that they could not subsist one moment without him.

'Thence I went in search of other Truths; and having propos'd Geometry for my Object, vvhich I conceiv'd as a continued Body, or a space indefinitely spread in length, breadth, height or depth, divisible into divers parts, vvhich might take several figures and bignesses, and be moved and transpos'd every vvay. For the Geometricians suppose all this in their Object. I pass thro some of their most simple Demonstrations; and having observed that this great certainty, vvhich all the World grants them, is founded only on this, that Men evidently conceived them, following the rule I already mentioned. I observed also that there was nothing at all in them vvhich ascertain'd me



me of the existence of their object. As for example, I well perceive, that supposing a Triangle, three angles necessarily must be equal to two right ones: but yet nevertheless I saw nothing which assured me that there was a Triangle in the World. Whereas returning to examine the *Idea* which I had of a perfect Being, I found its existence comprised in it, in the same manner as it was comprised in that of a Triangle, where the three angles are equal to two right ones; or in that of a Sphere, where all the parts are equally distant from the Center. Or even yet more evidently, and that by consequence, it is at least as certain that God who is that perfect Being, is, or exists, as any demonstration in Geometry can be.

But that which makes many persuade themselves that there is difficulty in knowing it, as also to know what their Soul is, 'tis that they never raise their thoughts beyond sensible things, and that they are so accustomed to consider nothing but by imagination, which is a particular manner of thinking on material things, that whatsoever is not imaginable, seems to them not intelligible: Which is manifest enough from this, that even the Philosophers hold for a Maxime in the Schools, That there is nothing in the Understanding which was not first in the Sense; where notwithstanding it's certain that the *Ideas* of God and of the Soul never were. And (methinks) those who use their imagination to comprehend them, are just as those, who to hear sounds, or smell odours, would make use of their eyes; save that there is yet this difference, That the sense of seeing assures us no less of the truth of its objects, than those of smelling or hearing do: whereas neither our imagination nor our senses can ever assure us of any thing, if our understanding intervenes not.

To be short, if there remain any who are not enough persuaded of the existence of God, and of their Soul, from the reasons I have produc'd, I would have them know, that all other things, whereof perhaps they think themselves more assured, as to have a body, and that there are Stars, and an Earth, and the like, are less certain. For although we had such a moral assurance of these things, that without being extravagant we could not doubt of them. However, unless we be unreasonable when a metaphysical certainty is in question, we cannot deny but we have cause enough not to be wholly confirm'd in them, when we consider that in the same manner we may imagine being asleep, we have other bodies, and that we see other Stars, and another earth, though there be no such thing. For how do we know that those thoughts which we have in our dreams, are rather false than the others, seeing often they are no less lively and significant, and let the ablest men study it as long as they please, I believe they can give no sufficient reason to remove this doubt, unless they presuppose the existence of God. For first of all, that which I even now took for a rule, to wit, that those things which were most clearly and distinctly conceived, are all true, is certain, only by reason, that God is or exists, and that he is a perfect being, and that all which we have comes from him. Whence it follows, that our *Ideas* or *Notions*, being real things, and which come from God in all wherein they are clear and distinct, cannot therein be but true. So that if we have very often any which contain falshood, they cannot be but of such things which are somewhat confus'd and obscure, because that therein they signifie nothing to us, that's to say, that they are thus confus'd in us only, because we are not wholly perfect. And it's evident that there is no less contrariety that falshood and imperfection should proceed from God, as such, than there is in this, that truth and falshood proceed from nothing. But if we know not that whatsoever was true and real in us comes from a perfect and infinite being, how clear and distinct soever our *Ideas* were, we should have no reason to assure us, that they had the perfection to be true.

Now after that the Knowledge of God, and of the Soul, hath rendered us thus certain of this rule, it's easie to know; that the extravagancies which we ima-

gine in our sleep, ought no way to make us doubt of the truth of those thoughts which we have being awake: For if it should happen, that even sleeping we should have a very distinct *Idea*; as for example, A Geometritian should invent some new demonstration, his sleeping would not hinder it to be true. And for the most ordinary error of our dreams, which consists in that they represent unto us several objects in the same manner as our exterior senses do, it matters not though it give us occasion to mistrust the truth of those *Ideas*, because that they may also often enough cozen us when we do not sleep; As when to those who have the Jaundies, all they see seems yellow; or, as the Stars or other Bodies at a distance, appear much less than they are. For in fine, whether we sleep or wake, we ought never to suffer our selves to be persuaded but by the evidence of our Reason; I say, (which is observable) Of our Reason, and not of our imagination, or of our senses. As although we see the Sun most clearly, we are not therefore to judge him to be of the bigness we see him of; and we may well distinctly imagine the head of a Lion, set on the body of a Goat, but therefore we ought not to conclude that there is a *Chimera* in the World. For Reason doth not dictate to us, that what we see or imagine is true: But it dictates, that all our *Ideas* or *Notions* ought to have some grounds of truth; For it were not possible, that God who is all perfect, and all truth, should have put them in us without that: And because that our reasonings are never so evident, nor so entire while we sleep as when we wake, although sometimes our imaginations be then as much or more lively and express. It also dictates to us, that our thoughts, seeing they cannot be all true by reason that we are not wholly perfect; what they have of truth, ought infallibly to occur in those which We have being awake, rather than in our dreams.

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